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ABSTRACT

Recent evidence indicates that subjects experience "distress" when they are beneficiaries of an inequitable distribution of rewards in a dyad. Yet, reinforcement theory postulates that individuals should experience more pleasure, the greater the reward they receive. An impression management hypothesis would reconcile these apparently opposing hypotheses. Persons may manifest guilt or distress when they experience positive inequity but privately experience pleasure. In a 3x2 factorial design these hypotheses were tested. In a worker-supervisor paradigm subjects served in pairs as workers and performed equally well. The supervisor then divided $1 between the workers, giving the subject 50 cents, 75 cents, or 90 cents. Measures of subjects' mood guilt and liking for the supervisor were measured either by paper-and-pencil tests or through a bogus pipeline procedure. The A x B linear trends provided strong support for an impression management hypothesis. (Author)

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A Test of an Impression Management Interpretation of Public Responses to Positive Inequity

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Title: A test of an impression management interpretation of public responses to positive inequity.

Statement of the Problem:

Numerous studies have shown that person adhere to a norm of equity in allocating rewards within a group (cf. Pritchard, Dunnete & Jorgenson, 1972). The mechanism proposed as mediating equity restoring behavior is an intrapsychic state referred to as distress (Adams, 1965; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1975) which may be experienced as guilt (positive inequity) or anger (negative inequity). Equity restoring behavior is presumed to reduce distress. In an extension of equity theory to the field of interpersonal attraction, it has been contended that persons receiving equitable outcomes will like their supervisors and co-workers more than persons experiencing positive inequity (Austin & Walster, 1974b). In the case of positive inequity these hypotheses seem to be in contradiction to straightforward reinforcement theory which would assume that independent of conditions of inequity a person would experience greater pleasure the more reward he received and would like the allocator more (Lott & Lott, 1974).

The several studies that have shown relationships among inequity, felt distress, and lowered attraction for the allocator have relied on paper-and-pencil measures of these psychological states. It is plausible that subjects used these measures to create a good impression of themselves (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Sigall & Page, 1971). Perhaps pepole who experience positive inequity are secretly happy but publicly express guilt or distress in order to gain approval for conforming to a norm strongly supported by other group members.

A 3 x 2 factorial experiment was designed to test the intrapsychic and social interaction hypotheses regarding reactions to positive inequity. Subjects (N=60) served as workers with a partner and both performed equally well on a task. A supervisor then divided $1 by giving the subject $.50, $.75, or $.90.

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Subjects revealed their reactions to the situation and the supervisor either by responding on a paper-and-pencil instrument or through a bogus pipeline procedure. According to an impression management theory: (1) expressed happiness should be a positive linear function of reward under bogus pipeline conditions, but a negative linear function under paper-and-pencil conditions; (2) subjects in the positive inequity conditions should express guilt on paper-and-pencil measures but not when their responses are obtained through bogus pipeline procedures; and (3) in the paper-and-pencil conditions liking for the supervisor will be greater in the equity than in the positive inequity conditions, but the opposite relationship should be obtained in the bogug pipeline conditions.

Subjects

Sixty female students who fulfilled an introductory psychology course requirement by their participation, were randomly assigned to the six experimental conditions.

Procedure

Subjects signed up for a study involving supervisor-worker relations. Upon arrival at the laboratory they found two same-sexed peers (confederates) already seated in the waiting room. The male experimenter promptly ushered all three into a small room and asked them to complete a five item opinion survey. The confederates surreptitiously copied the subject's answers - to be used in bogus pipeline conditions as part of the versimilitude operations and to be simply discarded in the paper-and-pencil conditions.

A fake lottery was held to assign supervisor and worker roles; the subject always drew a worker assignment. The task was to assemble difficult anagrams described as a test of spatial acuity. Ambiguous statements regarding scoring procedures and standards allowed the experimenter to manipulate feedback regarding performance without arousing suspicion. The workers were

informed that the experimenter would rate their performance, but the supervisor would be given $1 to distribute between them in any way she wanted. After working on the task for ten minutes the subject was taken to an individual cubicle where she was informed about her score and that of the other worker. Then she was informed about the supervisor's allocation of the $1.

Each subject learned that she and her co-worker performed equally well. Across conditions she was informed that the supervisor had allocated her $.50, $.75, or $.90 and was given the appropriate amount of money. The subject was then asked to fill out a Mood Adjective Check List (MACL) as part of the Psychology Department's survey of reactions by students to participation in research. The MACL included guilt, happiness, satisfaction, etc. and an index of satisfaction was obtained (see Austin & Walster, 1972a). Subjects were asked to evaluate the fairness, equitableness, and attractiveness of the supervisor and indicated how much they would like to have her as a supervisor again. All ratings were made on 7 point scales.

Subjects in the bogus pipeline conditions responded to all these measures by turning a dial moving a pointer along a scale. A response set for "telling the truth" was induced by deception procedures (described in detail by Jones & Sigall, 1971) that lead the subject to believe the bogus apparatus can detect their true feelings by implicit muscle responses. Presumably, if subjects believe the versimilitude procedures, they will be constrained to provide self-belief statements and will not be able to engage in feigning attitudes they do not privately hold.

Results

The success of the manipulation of inequity was indicated by the main effects obtained on ratings of the supervisor's equitableness ($F(2,54) = 10.21$, $p < .001$) and fairness ($F(2,54) = 22.78$, $p < .001$). Duncan Range Multiple comparisons revealed that on each measure all three means were different from one another and in the expected directions.

identical interaction was obtained on the subjects' preferences for working with the supervisor again ($F(2,54) = 4.35$, $p < .01$). These means are shown in Table 1.

Conclusion

The present pattern of results support an impression management interpretation of public responses to experiencing positive inequity. It is difficult to see how the proposed intrapsychic processes of distress or guilt aroused by experiences of positive inequity can explain why subjects in the bogus pipeline conditions reported being more happy the greater the reward they received. Clearly, subjects did expect rewards to be distributed equitably, but they were privately pleased when they profited from an inequitable allocation. Nevertheless, subjects did feign guilt and distress when their attitudes were assessed by paper-and-pencil measures. They also demonstrated support for the norm of equity by feigning dislike for an unfair allocator. But when subjects believed the experimenter could detect their true private attitudes (in the bogus pipeline conditions) subjects revealed that they liked an allocator who gave them an inequitably large share of the rewards.

A revision of equity theory is suggested by the present findings. Apparently, persons do behave in a manner that supports the equity norm, at least when they are under surveillance by others, and those who benefit from an unfair allocation of rewards make the appropriate public responses to indicate their support of the norm. However, persons experiencing positive inequity are secretly pleased that they have profited from a violation of the norm. The implication is that equity restoring behavior displayed in laboratory settings (e.g., Leventhal, Allen & Kemelgon, 1969) are not mediated by distress (or guilt) but by concern about group acceptance and/or the approval of the experimenter. It might be expected in future research

that the status or attraction of the experimenter or the cohesiveness of the group would affect the probability or degree of restitutive behavior.

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Table 1

Comparisons of Mean Ratings of Happiness, Liking for the Supervisor, and Preference for Working with the Supervisor on a Future Occasion[a]

	Equity Conditions					
	Paper-and-Pencil			Bogus Pipeline		
Dependent Variables	.50	.75	.90	.50	.75	.90
Happiness	2.8_b	2.9_b	2.1_c	2.8_b	2.9_b	3.7_a
Liking for Supervisor	1.1_c	$-.1_d$	$.7_c$	1.9_b	2.1_{ab}	2.6_a
Work with Supervisor	1.7_a	$-.8_d$	$-.5_d$	$.8_b$	$.7_b$	1.3_{ab}

[a]Means with different subscripts are significantly different from each other at $p < .05$ (Duncan Range Tests).